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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR CA/OCS RICK DOWELL  
FRANKFURT FOR RCO KERRY BROUGHAM

E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: LATVIA: NEW POLICE UNIT SEEKS TO KEEP TOURISTS SAFE IN RIGA

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Riga has a new tourist police unit with multilingual officers who patrol areas popular with visitors and operate a telephone hotline around the clock. The more sophisticated police presence at a time of widespread budget cuts illustrates that city officials recognize the importance of protecting the vital tourism industry. While the police reported a sharp increase in crime since the economic crisis began, we have not observed a corresponding spike in reported crimes involving American citizens. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) We first learned of the establishment of a new tourist-focused police unit in September 2009 through the local media. On January 14, RSO and Consular staff met at the Embassy with Andrejs Aronovs, the Chief of the new tourist police unit organized under the auspices of the Riga Municipal Police, to learn more about the specialized unit. He informed us the team consists of 14 officers who can communicate in several languages that are most popular with visitors, particularly English, French, and German. The officers wear highly visible reflective clothing and conduct both foot and vehicle patrols in the historic old city as well as in adjacent parks and transportation facilities. The officers are instructed to be proactive, and Aronovs described how officers approach apparent visitors who may be inadvertently walking into less safe areas of the city and offer them information or directions.

13. (SBU) Aronovs reported that, unsurprisingly, the peak hours of concern are in the late evening when many tourists emerge from bars and night clubs in an intoxicated state and are at a higher risk of being targeted by pickpockets, thieves, or con-artists. Aronovs also expressed appreciation for post's efforts to develop a widely publicized list (available on our Internet site and re-published in many city guide books) of unscrupulous night clubs which demand exorbitant payments from unsuspecting foreign clients when it is time to pay the bill. The tourist police, he reported, monitor clubs but can only do so in uniform, whereas other police units can conduct plainclothes operations. Sometimes groups of inebriated tourists cause public disorder problems, especially groups of young men on bachelor party excursions, but these problems tend not to involve American citizens.

14. (SBU) The tourist police in the field are linked to a telephone hotline that is staffed by multilingual police officers 24 hours per day who can provide information, assist with filing police reports, and dispatch officers to problem areas. There is also a network of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in key areas, and according to Aronovs police assets can generally reach any area of concern

within one minute. The tourist police have also developed a brochure in five languages providing the hotline, emergency contact information, and advice, which was distributed to area hotels. (Note: Per Aronov's request we also made these brochures available in our ACS waiting room and posted it on our Internet site. We also briefed Aronovs about how the Embassy duty officer system works and encouraged officers to contact us if they are dealing with an emergency situation involving an American citizen. End note.)

15. (SBU) Aronovs confirmed that, since the serious economic crisis began, crime figures have increased across the board "and in some categories doubled." Police salaries have also been reduced as the government seeks to reduce expenses, but Aronovs believes there are adequate resources for his unit to make a difference. He acknowledged that there is some rivalry with regular city police, who conduct some overlapping patrols, but his unit is now partnering with other units to leverage limited resources. Some regular police officers do not speak any English and are not specifically trained to focus on customer service. This shortcoming was evident in one incident in October 2009 when an American visitor was mugged across the river from the historic old city and was unable to communicate with responding officers or file a timely police report.

Comment:  
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16. (SBU) In recent months Riga officials have expanded marketing efforts in neighboring countries to lure more visitors on city break vacations, and Latvia's main airline Air Baltic continues to add destinations to its impressive flight network. The establishment of a tourist police unit in a difficult budget climate demonstrates that Latvia recognizes the need to protect the goose that lays sorely-needed golden eggs. We have not observed any substantial increase in reports of crimes involving U.S. citizens even though crime has been a growing concern for the police, which may be an indication that policing efforts have been effective.

GARBER